

The Conversation:

Using resistance to sustain rather than drain

DVRVCV interviewed leading prevention of violence against women practitioners to create the 'Unpacking Resistance' series. This article is based on those interviews and the videos can be found on DVRVCV's YouTube channel.

'Resistance' used to describe feminist resistance to the patriarchy. Now, as gender equality gains traction both politically and socially, it's often used to describe those who feel their privilege or power is threatened. Fielding questions, responding to pushback, engaging in debate, and even anticipating this response, can lead to fatigue, frustration, stress and burnout. DVRVCV recently developed a series of videos focusing on how prevention practitioners respond to the resistance they face on the ground. This article is based on interviews with those practitioners.

Practitioners generally agree that resistance is a sign that change is underway, but dealing regularly with resistance can be stressful and exhausting. Joel Radcliffe, Co-founder and Principal Consultant at LEAP (LGBTQ Education and Advocacy Project) says he used to get "a rush of adrenaline and feel under attack" when he encountered resistance. Now he says, "If you let that feeling drive you, it's really easy to take it personally and get defensive, which can be counterproductive".

We believe our work is essential to preventing violence against women, so it makes sense that we invest so much of ourselves. So, how do we work with resistance in ways that empower and sustain rather than demoralise and drain us?

Ellen Perriment, Project Officer at Monash University, says it's important to develop strong evidence-based content knowledge. "For me, it's about preparing counters for the arguments I've previously encountered and making sure that my knowledge is really solid". Ellen also emphasises the power of cultivating allies for the sustainability of her work and her wellbeing, "staying connected to people who share your goals and values is incredibly important".

Equally important is how organisations can prepare their staff for the resistance they're likely to face from clients, the general public or even their colleagues.

Management support cannot be underestimated. Ellen finds that "the support of the people I report to really helps. Having them listen and take on board my suggestions elevates my voice when it needs to be heard".

Natalie Russell is the Principal Program Officer of Mental Wellbeing at VicHealth. She's clear that organisations can support practitioners by ensuring all levels of leadership are committed, a comprehensive gender equality strategy is enacted, strategic partnerships are formed with allies and structures are in place to share experiences and skills. VicHealth has a weekly gender

equality workshop where, Natalie says, "we discuss work related to gender equality and PVAW. We can gain advice from our colleagues, and support if resistance or challenges arise".

It's important that individual practitioners develop an awareness of their needs and limits, including navigating the inevitability of resistance. And, if we as a sector are committed to the long term changes in culture that are required to end violence against women, it's equally important that organisations act on this awareness to prevent burnout and support the long term health and wellbeing of workers. ■

HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO RESISTANCE?

Unpacking resistance in the respectful relationships and prevention of violence against women sector.

STRATEGIES FOR RESPONDING TO RESISTANCE

1. Prepare answers for anticipated, and unexpected, responses.
2. Respond with curiosity like 'tell me more about that' to open up dialogue, listen and understand the person's motivations. They will feel heard and you will have time to think.
3. Develop framing strategies to help you explain why the initiative is important to partners or the community.
4. Identify allies who can support you, particularly leaders.
5. Share the load within the organisation.